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Vote for Question A to expand hiring of people with disabilities

Among the great recent advances of social justice in the United States are improved opportunities for people with disabilities. However, much remains to be done. The support of county voters for Ballot Question A, an amendment to the County's Charter, is essential for the county to be able to maximize employment opportunities in county government for qualified people with severe physical and mental disabilities.

For many years, the county's Commission on People with Disabilities has strongly advocated for expanded employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In July, after hearing compelling testimony from a broad array of people with disabilities, and from representatives of The Arc, Community Support Services, Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind, The Ivymount School, the Jewish Foundation for Group Homes and other organizations that assist people with disabilities, the County Council voted unanimously to place Question A on the ballot. Its passage would enable the county to establish a program where county managers could directly hire qualified people with severe disabilities into certain jobs.

In addition to the Commission on People with Disabilities, this charter amendment is strongly supported by County Executive Isiah Leggett and the Commission on Veterans' Affairs. As the home of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Montgomery County is the first stop for most wounded warriors returning from abroad.

Federal government managers have long had the authority and flexibility to directly hire qualified people with severe disabilities under the Schedule A program, but Montgomery's charter does not allow the county to establish a similar program. That's why this charter amendment is needed. The details of the program would be implemented through the normal legislative process, including a public hearing, if voters approve Question A in November.

It's important for the county to have the authority to establish a Schedule A-type program because the unemployment and underemployment rate for people with disabilities far exceeds the general unemployment rate.

The county government has done almost all that it can, given the limitations in the county charter, to provide job opportunities for people with disabilities. The county has trained its managers how to assess and provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities, and to provide a supportive work environment. In 2009, I proposed and the council unanimously approved a law that gives a hiring preference to veterans and to people with disabilities who are in the highest rated group of applicants for an initial position in county government. Last month, County Executive Leggett established an internship program, Project Search — a partnership between the county, the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services, the National Institutes of Health, The Ivymount School, and SEEC, an adult rehabilitation provider — that places people with disabilities in various county government departments. However, like a previous internship program for people with disabilities operated by the county's Department of Health and Human Services, these positions must be temporary because of language in the current county charter.

This inability to place successful interns in permanent positions within county government is a lost opportunity — not only for the interns who must start the job search process from scratch, but also for taxpayers, who often must pay for increased social services when people with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed.

One of the major challenges to getting a job facing people with disabilities is the perception among some employers that a person with a severe disability will not be a productive employee, as well as concerns about the accommodations that may be necessary for the individual to be able to work. However, most employers who hire people with disabilities find that those employees are not only productive, but are extraordinarily reliable and loyal, and that meeting the legal requirement for "reasonable accommodations" is not burdensome or costly.

Our county government should do everything it can to be a model employer of people with disabilities. Only then will we have done right by our most vulnerable residents and have the moral standing to call on the private sector to do the same. Voters can enable county government to be a model employer of people with disabilities by voting for Question A.

Philip Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg is a member of the County Council and proposed Question A.